

The Morse Code and the Telegraph Lines in Lehi

By John K. Haws Jr.

In a recent meeting of the “Friends of Camp Floyd”, local citizen historians Russell Felt, Carl Mellor, Neldon Bullock and other members including Mike Moon, the owner of Lehi Business Swift Printing and staff from Camp Floyd discussed a future exhibit of the Morse Code out at Camp Floyd and the interactive experience that this is going to do for the students of Utah. I had very little to give on the subject, so my mind went into a daydream about the past.

At the age of twelve, a new Scout entered the program with unfathomable zeal. Gary Findlay was the Scoutmaster of the Lehi Fifth Ward and Jay Findlay was the Patrol Leader of this new Scout. Both the requirements of Second and First Class had requirements of the Morse Code. It was a stumbling block of many a Scout to be able to know and send messages with the Morse Code. In a matter of a few days, the Scout had learned and passed off the Morse Code to his Patrol Leader.

Each time the former Scout goes into the John Hutchings Museum and sees some original Telegraph Lines that were donated by Joe Nardone, a national Pony Express expert and an interactive exhibit where students can try the Morse Code, his heart races as he experience these moments in his mind again. An actual telegraph machine used in train stations is located in the Lehi Railroad Museum on State Street. Lehi is fortunate to have such authentic items for students to experience.

Samuel Morse was given the credit for the creation of the telegraph even though it was tinkered with by others. On 02 September, 1837, Morse sent the first

message over 1,700 feet of wire . Within a matter of months afterwards, Morse had developed the Morse Code with a system of dots and dashes.

These bright men taught that the American Morse Code was different than the International Morse Code. Americans usually march to a different beat. The American Morse Code was what the Boy Scouts of America taught the Scouts in the past. The Morse Code is now obsolete and the Boy Scouts of America do not have it as a requirement for their rank advancements nor have a signalling merit badge.

The Telegraph really changed the way of life in America and especially in the West. With the approaching Civil War, Congress passed legislation granting an annual subsidy of \$40,000 to complete a transcontinental telegraph line. Western Union through two subsidiaries, Overland Telegraph Company and Pacific Telegraph Company successfully completed the Project. This Telegraph line came right through Lehi and out through the Cedar Valley to Fairfield and Camp Floyd and on through the desert to California.

In 1861, as the lines were going through Utah , Brigham Young sent a notice to the President and Congress that “Utah had not seceded but is firm to the constitution and laws of our once happy country.” (Van Wagoner 369).

Wise historian Carl Mellor told the group that the Mormons built their own telegraph line from Logan to St. George in 1867 to increase communication among the Saints. The Deseret Telegraph Company installed the first wire into David Evan’s home in Lehi. Springville telegrapher Ina Johnson was placed in charge until a local could be trained. Barbara A Evans (daughter of David Evans) became the first to be trained. She learned it quickly because it was in her home. She became very proficient and later became the Lehi Railroad Station Agent.

The train stations became the very center of the telegraph. Trains were scheduled and reported by the use of the telegraph. Barbara Evans was known as one of the best in the west. Brigham Young brought Colonel Thomas Kane and his wife Elizabeth Wood Kane to see the train station in operation. Seeing Ms. Evans, Mrs. Kane stated that “It was an example of one of the contradictions of Mormonism. Thousands of years behind us in some of their customer, in others, you would think these people the most forward children of the age. They close no career on a woman in Utah by which she can earn a living.” (Kane 4-5)

The Deseret Telegraph Company offices were transferred from Bishop Evan’s home to the Lehi Commercial and Savings Bank after it came into being at 206 East State Street, Mosiah Evans, son of David Evans continued to manage the Deseret Telegraph office. The line kept communication open between the Church authorities and the people. Church correspondences, sermons, queries and circulars were sent over the telegraph lines. Local operators received their financial support from collections gathered by ward teachers. The Deseret Telegraph Company was sold to Western Union in 1900. (Van Wagoner 370)

In the Lehi City Archives, we have photographs of artistic drawings of the Pony Express riders riding by men installing telegraph lines. There are also pictures of the lines being installed in Lehi.

As communication signals and national interactions continue to change swiftly, we are fortunate to have organizations like the “Friends of Camp Floyd”, Lehi City and the John Hutchings Museum, and Railroads museums all over the country including one in Lehi, to tell and preserve the history of the Telegraph and the function of the Morse Code in history of our Community and State.

Sources:

Kane, Elizabeth W. "Twelve Mormon Homes" University of Utah 1973.

Van Wagoner, Richard. "Lehi-Portrait of a Utah Town" Lehi City Corp. 1990.